

Battling for towns' hearts, ads

New tools, old rivalries
spawn start-up papers

By Robert Preer
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DUXBURY — When the splashy new arrival landed in every mailbox in town last month, John H. Cutler was ready.

Cutler, founder and publisher of the Duxbury Clipper, responded to the debut of the Duxbury Mariner — a full-sized, multisection broadsheet with front-page color — by launching a cut-rate subscription drive for his own folksy tabloid.

"They think they are going to demolish the Clipper," the 86-year-old Cutler said defiantly. "Well, they demolished us so that our circulation went up by 600 in
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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / BARRY CHIN

Rival publishers share a bench, from left, Margaret Smoragiewicz, Duxbury Mariner; John Cutler, Duxbury Clipper; and Phyllis Hughes, Duxbury Reporter.

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one month."

Another competitor, the Duxbury Reporter, heralded the Mariner with an even-handed, front-page story. While Cutler was cocky about his paper's ability to best the new broadsheet, the Reporter's publisher, Phyllis Hughes, was more circumspect.

"Frankly, every paper affects us," Hughes said. "Any paper that comes into the market can take away revenue."

As it has in other communities around the country, a newspaper war has broken out in this seaside town of 14,000, where three rivals are chronicling Duxbury's news, and reporters sometimes outnumber participants at selectmen's meetings.

While it is highly unusual for one town to have three papers, communities with two weekly papers are increasingly common in Massachusetts and elsewhere. Locally and across the country, there has been a surge in newspaper start-ups.

No one knows for sure how many weeklies there are in the United States. But Frank J. Romano of the

School of Printing Management at Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, N.Y., estimates the number has jumped 10 to 15 percent in the last year and a half.

Many new papers are started by entrepreneurs, while others are produced by newspaper chains seeking to expand advertising reach or head off competitors, he said.

Starting a newspaper has become easier and cheaper recently. Although newsprint costs have risen, prices for computers, copiers and printers have plunged, and desktop publishing software now makes it possible to produce a newspaper in a living room.

In the past year, weeklies have been started in more than a dozen Massachusetts communities, including Milton, Mansfield, Provincetown, Barnstable, Beverly, Cohasset, Bridgewater and three Boston neighborhoods.

Last December, Patricia Desmond, who has worked at several Boston-area newspapers, started the Milton Times to compete with the Milton Record-Transcript, a 96-year-old weekly run since 1994 by Tribune Publishing, a Boston chain.

Desmond puts out the Times

with two Macintosh computers, one ink-jet printer, one laser printer and three family members.

"My daughter, who's 25, does production, my son, who's 17, delivers it, and my mother is my proof-reader," she said.

The offices of the two papers are next door to each other on a side street in Milton's Lower Mills section, giving the town of 26,000 its own newspaper row. The Transcript's trademark is its highly opinionated, often combative editorials, while the Times is noted for its softer, chattier style.

Half of the Duxbury Clipper's front page is advertisements. The paper is packed with small news items that chronicle town life: weddings, births, deaths, school plays, bird watching and even accounts of residents' vacations.

Cutler, who founded the paper in 1960 and works six days a week, is as much a town institution as his newspaper. For many years, officials and politicians trooped to Cutler's office on Saturday mornings to chat about local affairs.

The Reporter is known for its harder-edged news coverage and controversial "Speak Out" column,

which prints readers' anonymous comments left on an answering machine.

Published in Plymouth by Memorial Press - which is owned by George Prescott Co., the publisher of the Patriot Ledger of Quincy - the Reporter has a polished look.

The Duxbury Mariner is the latest addition to the 119-paper Community Newspaper chain, which is owned by Fidelity Capital of Boston.

Published at Community Newspaper's south headquarters in Marshfield, the Mariner is filled with photos, features and oversized ads. Its full-color front page is rare in weeklies, because of the high production cost.

The big winners in the newspaper wars are readers, who receive a choice of news and ads and special subscription deals.

"I read them all," said Lynn Sinclair, who has lived in Duxbury a dozen years and is active in community groups. "I think each has its own particular character."

Long-time resident Dorothea Galassi is less than thrilled, however. "I think we should be getting just one," she said. "I have enough stuff to traipse to the dump."